

Provincial debut a golden one for young Springer

Dela Pena claims all-around Level 6 championship

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

A distinct clang rings out as Diana Dela Pena drops her latest hardware haul around her neck. It's a sweet sound — one that elicits an encouraging response.

"I love that sound," says a slightly older club-mate, offering a big smile.

That congratulatory-type comment is something the young gymnast is becoming quite familiar with since reigning supreme at the provincial championships in Windsor.

On the strength of a first-place finish in her bread-and-butter bars event, the nine-year-old eclipsed Ottawa's Chelsey Louis-Jean by less than two-tenths of a point (37.742) for overall Level 6 gold, giving the Milton Springers their first all-around Ontario champ in five years.

"I was so happy... and surprised," said Diana, who soon after joining the club at age five was identified as having competitive team

potential. She lived up to that by beating out 31 competitors for her provincial triumph. "It felt really good to win."

Working with the newly-crowned provincial champ for the past two years now, coach Maryna Vorobyova stressed that while Diana's talent has always been apparent, her work ethic is perhaps her strongest attribute.

"She has these goals in her head and will keep working on them until she gets it right," said Vorobyova, who instructs Diana alongside Krista Johnsen and Candice Feinrip. "She wants to get everything perfect. She's very dedicated."

While a perennial powerhouse on bars, her recent improvements on beam also factored heavily into making her provincial debut a victorious one.

Much more sure of her footing during jumps now after a somewhat fearful stretch on the beam, Diana secured the bronze in that discipline in Windsor.

"Yeah I'm definitely more confident (on beam)

now," she said. "It took a lot of practice."

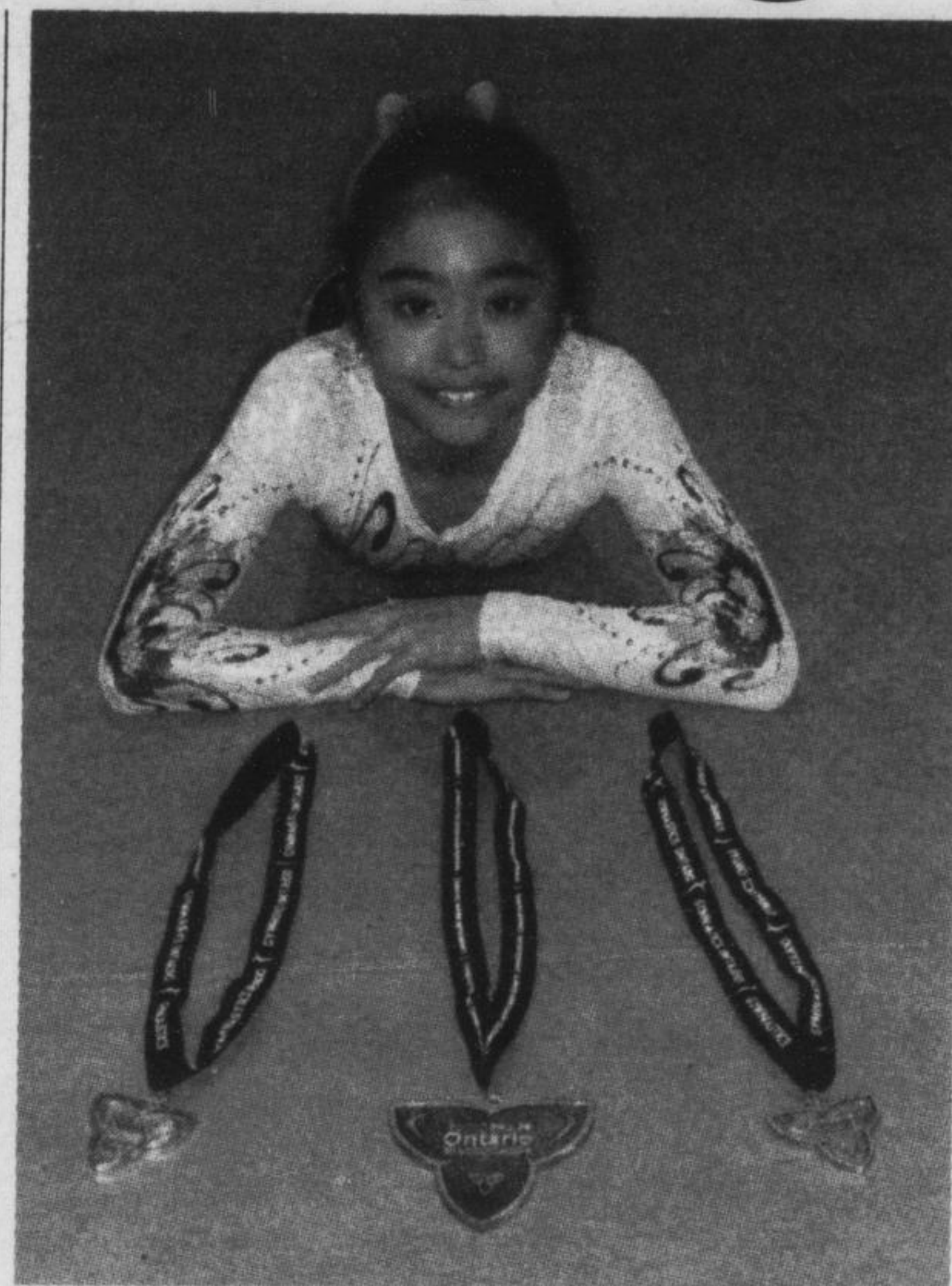
A fourth-place in her floor routine and seventh on vault rounded out her provincial campaign, which followed all-around top-three finishes at all three qualifying meets — including a golden performance at her home club in early March.

Also coming away from provincials with some hardware was fellow nine-year-old Dani Silvestre, who increased her overall score by more than two full points to place fifth in the Level 5 ranks.

That was due largely to a golden floor routine and a silver on bars.

Buoyed by an all-around victory enjoyed during her recent international debut at the Cancun Cup (Mexico), Level 8 competitor Keiara Jones-Tyrell boosted her all-around results to move up the provincial rankings, while the Springers' seven other representatives enjoyed personal-best efforts in at least one event.

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Diana Dela Pena shows the Level 6 medals she earn at the Ontario Gymnastics Championships in Windsor. Steve LeBlanc / Canadian Champion

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Team chemistry just kept building, says Smith

Persevering through a brush with altitude sickness that came with recent training in nearby Courchevel, France, NEXXICE delivered a club record 146.03-point free program to nudge itself between two powerhouse Finland teams on the podium — finishing less than three points behind the country's first-entry team and a razor-thin quarter-of-a-point ahead of its second-entry squad.

Skating to a West Side Story theme in the free program and a Midnight Waltz (Cinderella) one for the short program — in which they earned a score of 74.84 — the silver medalists showed a heightened chemistry over that of their bronze-medal

performance at January's Mozart Cup in Austria.

"I feel our biggest improvement (from Mozart Cup) was our ability to feel each other on the ice and skate to match the style and expression of the skaters beside us," noted Smith, who helped NEXXICE maintain its national supremacy in late February in Burnaby, B.C., with a decisive eighth straight Canadian gold medal win.

"We were able to carry that through nationals and worlds. We became very spatially aware, which meant we were very clean during the competition."

So was Smith nervous about her debut on the world stage?

"I had quite a lot of nerves leading into the short program, but the practice time on the competition rink beforehand really prepares you for what the stadium is going to be like when it's holding 3,000-plus people.

"By the time the music starts I'm usually pretty 'in the zone' and all things outside the program become white noise."

This season marked the third straight silver for NEXXICE, and sixth time on the world championship podium — including Canada's only gold in 2009.

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